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Caution Is the Word on CIA

The movement for a Senate investigation of the Central Intelligence Agency has a superficial attraction, but responsible lawmakers should think twice before backing the idea.

Several key members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, including Chairman William Fulbright (D-Ark.), feel there should be closer and more effective congressional supervision of the hush-hush agency.

They are expected to offer a resolution authorizing the committee to investigate the CIA, especially its impact on foreign policy.

President Johnson, like his predecessors, presumably will do what he can to head off such an inquiry on grounds that the danger is too great of leaks which would embarrass the United States, imperil the national security and reduce the CIA's effectiveness.

The Fulbright committee's interest is understandable, since the activities of the secrecy-shrouded agency clearly do affect America's foreign relations.

Details are secret, but the CIA is reported to spend more money—and to have more men abroad—than the State Department itself.

There has been legitimate concern over charges that CIA agents have sometimes worked at cross-purposes with the policies of the government they serve.

Fulbright, himself, is convinced that the agency misled Mr. Johnson as to the dangers of a Communist take-over in the Dominican Republic. (Others disagree.)

The CIA's defenders concede that it, like any human agency, has made mistakes—and perhaps used its cloak of secrecy to cover up.

But members of Congress most familiar with CIA operations note that the agency's blunders are highly publicized, while its triumphs normally go unsung.

There is a suspicion, too, that bureaucratic rivalries and jealousies are a factor in the current challenge to the CIA.

Finally, to a degree not fully appreciated in Congress itself, CIA activities already are audited by special House and Senate subcommittees.

Members of these groups appear to be generally satisfied with the information they get from the CIA. But they are not, and cannot ever be, free to tell the public and other congressmen what they learn in briefings.

If House and Senate leaders nevertheless feel an inquiry is essential to public confidence, the investigation should be made by a special committee chosen for its discretion and responsibility.

In the final analysis, the CIA must maintain its secrecy or go out of business. Congress and the public have no choice but to trust the watchdog subcommittees.